

## Confessions to Myself

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Summary: Following his best friend's departure from NCIS, Tim McGee takes a harsh, third-person look at his own life and career. Half a bottle of bourbon and three hours later, these are the words that rolled down the page in his typewriter.

## Confessions to Myself

More than a dozen years you've been playing this gig. A dozen times three hundred and sixty five-plus days a year, and if you think you shouldn't count the ones where you weren't actually working, you're a bigger idiot than you know. You may not be at work, physically, but work is always at you.

This place, it's made of moments, little flashes of mental snapshots that blink past unbidden. The sliver of time (or hours on end, there have been so many), shared sitting in a car and knowing that the next millisecond's move would irreversibly change your entire life. (For the record, sometimes you didn't do it, but then again, sometimes you did.)

And every day, there was a nagging sense of "Is this what I thought it would be?" But you didn't have time to answer yourself, because someone else was always poking-prodding-interrupting and you shuffled those papers too, and tied up those loose ends and filed that request and filled out that form too, and wondered how the hell could you even drink that much coffee without burning a hole in your insides.

Standing in the alley behind the building, sneaking a smoke in the snow (yeah, you're not the choirboy everyone thinks you are, champ), the brain pictures keep scrolling past. You can't help it; it's the same alley where you once sat in the rain with a sobbing co-worker and talked them through a break-up, or a break-down, or a bad case or a worse fuck. You are the confidante, the confessor, the comrade, and it makes you so tired that you can't sleep most nights.

You listened to rants and regrets and you hoped to hell that you were saying the right things and shutting up in the right spots. You are the one who hears the worst and is always asked to "keep it under your hat", and you do because that is the right thing and you're a nice guy. \_You're like a brother to me.\_ (Holy shit, are you tired of hearing that one.) You swap shifts and work ridiculously long stretches without a day off. You're the one who inevitably has to process the shit and the puke and the dead things.

Inside the little glass-walled room, you received confessions of theft, dishonor, illness and indiscretion. Murder? Yeah, people admitted to it, some even a little gleefully. You almost admire their brashness as it repulses you, and you wonder if it's starting to get to you, starting to erode your life-long sense of right and wrong. Man, life used to be so easy, so black and white, with crisp corners and straight edges. But then came The Big Orange Room, and you started being not so sure about who the bad guy was on any given day.

Every time you lean back in your desk chair, caffeine-jittery hands swiping at your burning eyes, you can see the faces of the ones who left. The ones who walked out... they always looked a little shell-shocked but relieved. Truth is, there haven't been that many who walk away. The smart ones do, you guess, but the gluttons keep coming back until they don't come back anymore, in the bad way.

It's the ones who left zippered up in a bag, those are the faces who haunt you. Jesus, so many good people, so many people you got close to, thinking "Well, I know Him, we're pals, we go out for drinks, nothing is gonna happen to good ol' Him." But it did and you are horrified and secretly relieved that it wasn't you, but someday it probably will be. You have a ridiculous moment of self-preservation and actually consider a transfer to Cyber, but that would only protect you and not your friends, not your \_best\_ friends. And you would feel like a heel, like an absolute shit, because you hid when the firefight started. So you grab your gear and head out again and again and hope that you come back at the end of the day, because you didn't get your dry-cleaning yet and you gotta call your mom and there is so much you haven't \_done\_ yet, you can't die please please please.

Looking back, it's flown faster than a blink, and crawled achingly slowly through interminable minutes and hours and days at work. But it's not the length of time, the measurement of shifts and paperwork and bleary overnights that you remember.

It's the people, good and bad.

Now, people are weird, no matter who they are. A bundle of quirks and anxieties and egos tied up in a fragile bag of skin that has no hope of containing it all, that's people for you. And you have witnessed a veritable freak parade, my friend. You started calling it the Stationary Circus, The Big Orange Side Show, because every day seemed to unveil a new level of weird. A day rarely passed when you didn't wonder if it was all some sort of hidden-camera reality series, shooting on the sly. Every combination of oddity imaginable was on exhibit. Eventually, you became immune to the bizarre.

And one day, the truth hits you: you were no longer just a player in the side-show. Congratulations, son... you have become the Main

Attraction. Oh yeah, you can ignore it while you're awake, well, pretty much. You can try to act normal and competent like everything is okay. But at night, the Freak Show happens.

Wavery-faced crowds pressing up against the bars, the stench of cotton candy and blood making you choke, the flashy-flickery strobe lights making you feel off-balance as you stumble backward, pressing against the cold steel bars of the cage that is not quite tall enough to stand up in, the floor sticky under your feet. The carnival barker's back to you, his striped vest threadbare and stiff with sweat, straw boater balanced on his balding head, points his cane into the crowd and announces in a voice so familiar: "Step right up, ladies and gents! See the Amazing Special Agent", but he says it in such a way that it's as if the words taste bad, oily and rotten and waiting to be spat on the filthy ground. And he does, he turns and spits at you and smiles, relishing the way you flinch.

"It's the smartest idiot you'll ever see! An absolutely tragic waste of skin and organs... it lives to be hated and it loves the pain, folks..." and he smashes his cane against the bars with a clang and you jump and and whimper just a little and slam your back against the bars, sliding down to crouch in the corner, as far away from that scary bastard as you can get.

"It's a FREEEEEAK, a monster, a horrible mistake of Nature... why, it's own mother is repulsed by it!" The barker leans in close, so close that you can smell the fetid breath that courses around his tombstone-shaped teeth. He grins broadly, flicking the tip of his tongue over his leathery lips. And then, the worst thing: he whispers the next part. And you know that scratchy, horrible rasp from the dark, and just like that, you're eleven years old again and there is still nowhere to hide.

"Where is she now, sonny? Huh? Hahaha, fucking freeeeeak... you should have died by now, you disgusting piece of garbage." And you stagger backward and hunker down in the furthest corner while the side-show barker points a finger at you and laughs and calls you names. That creepy old carny has your father's face, and you put your hands over your eyes and hope he'll just go away and leave you alone, for chrissakes... \_Please stop hitting me!\_

When you startle awake, you know that it didn't happen, not this time, but you can't get awake enough to stop your heart from trying to climb out of your throat. It was just a bad dream, but it used to be real and you can't stop it from coming back night after night. You know, in your grown-up mind, that it is stress and exhaustion and eating crappy fast food, but that is what your job requires. Your work makes you run this gauntlet almost every night. But no matter how many times you had that nightmare, you didn't quit doing what was causing it. You couldn't stop the symptoms because you knowingly walked into the illness every day. You had rent to pay and being a freak is just a job, right?

No shame.

There are days, many many days, when you wonder why you keep going back.

But you do, because this job has gotten you through some tough times. It made you realize that, with all the crap you deal with on a daily

basis, you can pretty much handle anything. It could be worse, much worse. You know that is true, because you've seen worse. You've \_done\_ worse. This is not so bad.

You do it again and again and again, because the people and the moments are your job. You'll probably be doing it long enough to have a twenty-year anniversary. Hell, you're such a masochist, you'll probably stay another five or six years past that, until you're so sick and broken that one day, you just can't crawl in and deal with the crazies anymore. You're trapped in a dysfunctional, abusive relationship with your job. You are scared to leave because you think you can't do better, and you probably deserve to be treated like crap. At the end of most days, this job is all you have. It is all you are, and the sick and messed up thing is, you think that's okay. Even if you argue with yourself that you deserve better, you make no move to leave.

But one day, you may see that green grass in the other pasture, and decide to jump the fence. And maybe the next day, you'll walk into the Big Office, hand them your years and people and moments compacted in two or three sentences and let them know that in seventy or eighty hours, you won't work there anymore.

On the last day, your co-workers may even take you out for a drink or two, but you have to realize that's just for gossip fodder once the door closes behind you. They don't care about you. You don't care about them. You don't know \_these\_ people, because all the people you cared about are gone or dead. It's just the polite thing to do, so you do it and inwardly sigh a little whiff of relief, knowing that these two-faced bastards will be in your past and you never have to pretend to like them again.

And afterward, you walk out the door one last time and the giant weight of being a freak lifts off you and you feel ten years younger and forty pounds lighter. You grunt and stretch and finally lower your shoulders, because for so many years it feels like they have been hunched up and attached to your earlobes. You feel free.

Then you'll move on and settle in down the road somewhere, under a new roof with new people and new moments. But after a while, the Truth will settle on your shoulder and it'll smirk a jaggedy grey grin as it watches you squirm. Then, it will lean down and grasp your collar in it's spiky little fingers, while you pause, holding your breath in anticipation of the cold, hard reality that's about to spill out, and Truth will hiss in your ear "Welcome back to the Freak Show, baby." And your nightmares, freak? Ah, they've been waiting for you.

End  
file.